



**The WWOOFer's Guide to WWOOFing in the USA**

**How to Volunteer on Farms across the Country**

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## A little about me

### My life is your vacation

People say I'm doing exactly what they dream of doing, but how did I end up doing this?

What to do when your heart longs for the out of doors but you live in a city, spending your weekdays cooped up in a classroom? You kiss your job good-bye and hit the open road... with a plan.

Since childhood my favorite place to be is outside. There is a feeling of being fully alive in a world full of possibilities and without fear. Once while walking down a steep hill in my neighborhood, my mind was filled with a vision of a golden wheat field. I felt ecstasy. I was ten at the time. Kids are always having weird visions so I didn't pay much attention to it. A year later, while going home on a school bus, the vision came again. I had no idea what it meant. "I'll understand it when I'm older," I thought to my young self. Now as an adult I remember that vision.

Like many of the farmers I've met, I always wanted to have land. When I watched TV and heard about a celebrity who had 250 acres out in Montana, my heart would go wild with desire. Not for the celebrity, but for their land. I wanted land, lots of land, as much as I could get. But why? I didn't know. Then I read *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck. A line from the book grabbed me: "A man is not at peace until he has land." Yes, that was it. Land gives one a feeling of profound peace. It goes with the feelings of freedom, being alive, and believing in possibilities that I get with being outside. So now I knew why I wanted land.

In 2011 I was pondering my life like I often do, and I remembered the vision of the wheat field from my childhood. I knew immediately what it meant. It was my future. Maybe not growing wheat, but certainly being a farmer. About this same time I stumbled on a talk about the Camino de Santiago in Spain at a local travel bookstore. Half way through the talk I'd made the decision to do the 500 mile pilgrimage that summer. I was ripe for a pilgrimage since I was at a transition time in my life. My teaching job was fine, but I wanted more in life. While walking the Camino, I would spend a month alone with my thoughts on farming. So in June of 2012 I set off across northern Spain accompanied by visions of the farm I'd have on Vashon Island, a small rural island across from Seattle. In my vision I was sitting outside at a table on my farm under a vibrant blue sky. I kept having this fantasy until I realized this endless azure sky I was envisioning was the Spanish blue sky, not the gray, tree crowded sky of Seattle. Undaunted, I came home with plans to buy land on Vashon.

Try as I might I could not find any visual appeal on Vashon. It was everything I wanted in a community: organic farming, musicians, artists, and it was a short ferry ride from Seattle and the school where I taught. I could have the best of both worlds: a job to pay the bills, and summers off to develop my farm. But Vashon just didn't appeal to me. Looking at it from the shores of Seattle, it was a lovely tree-filled island. Once on Vashon, it was an island of TV and radio towers, and spindly second growth trees. The island had been logged and needed time to regrow. Even the beaches I found depressing. As perfect

as it seemed, Vashon was not for me. With my plan shattered and no idea of what to do next, I fell into a slight depression.

A few weeks later I was killing time at a bookstore to get my money's worth from a parking fee I'd paid to do an orienteering event. After roaming around the store, I ended up in the magazine section. I spotted a magazine with an article on soap making. I'd just gotten into DIY--do-it-yourself-- and soap making was on my short list of something to try. When I picked up the magazine, it opened to the first page of an article on WWOOFing. "I've heard of that," I thought, remembering wanting to experience farm life and doing a web search on 'WWOOF' back in 2000 but only finding WWOOFing in Australia, a land too far away. I checked out the article on soap making and flipped back to the article on WWOOFing. I read no more than the subheading that said "Room, board, and an education in farming in exchange for your labor." I closed the magazine, my decision made: I'd quit my teaching job at the end of the school year and go WWOOFing.

## What is WWOOFing?

Simply put, WWOOFing is a chance to experience farm life. In exchange for room, board, and an education in organic farming, you give a few hours of labor to the farm. You will get hands-on experience in preparing soil, planting seeds, harvesting vegetables, weeding, working with farm animals, and possibly building infrastructure. WWOOFing is a way to meet new people who share a passion for farming and living an outdoor lifestyle. You'll get to see where your food comes from, learn traditional skills like canning or foraging, and learn how to cook from scratch. It's a way to connect with nature, seeing the full moon each month, taking walks, and watching the seasons change. It will also take you out of your comfort zone from time to time.

Each farm sets the number of hours it wants its WWOOFers to work. The usual range is between 25 and 35 hours a week. If there is a lot to be done, the hours could be longer. If there's not a lot to do, there could be more free time. Some farms have season-long internships where a WWOOFer gets to experience life on a farm from sowing seeds in the spring to clean up in the fall. Other farms offer weekend stays and are happy to have you bring your children.

WWOOFers are welcomed into the hosts' home like family. Accommodations are frequently a guest bedroom. Some farms have a lot of WWOOFers and have a special WWOOFer area where they all live and cook together.

Most WWOOFers are women in their late teens and twenties, though there is a growing number of WWOOFers over 40. There are also WWOOFers from overseas who want a deeper experience while visiting the US. WWOOFing is a rewarding way to travel since you get to spend an extended amount of time in an area, and the hosts are eager to share their knowledge of the history, environment, and culture.

## Deciding to WWOOF

Do you need a break from your monotonous desk job? Is school debt getting you down? Would you like to try something new? Do you want to be a farmer? People decide to WWOOF for a variety of reasons. Most WWOOFers are in their 20s, but there are older WWOOFers, too. Anyone who is physically fit and enjoys the outdoors can WWOOF. WWOOFing can be part of a summer vacation to explore the US, or it can be part of a career change, like it is for me. For students looking for something to do during the summer, WWOOFing is an easy choice. For people like me the decision requires more thought and planning. It's a big step to leave the security of a professional job, put your possessions in storage, and give up your house or apartment. What if things don't work out and you wish you had your old life back? If your old life were fulfilling, you wouldn't be pondering giving it up. Ben Franklin would point out, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

If you're feeling anxious about taking a new step in life, figure out what is bothering you. Are you fearful of stepping into the unknown? Are you worried about running out of money? Don't know what to do with your pet fish, where to get health insurance, or where to live once you are homeless? These situations have solutions. Take some time to look for options, and then choose the one that feels right to you. People say that when you are on your path in life, the universe will open up to you, meaning things will work out. I found this to be true. It's hard to let go of comfort and routine, but letting go gives you a feeling of lightness and freedom. Once you've made the decision to take a new path in life, your world will feel different. You'll live mindfully, feeling the present moment. Have faith that you will have a rewarding experience.

I used WWOOFing as a way to do my bucket list. I always wanted to drive across country, see the fall foliage in Vermont, visit the Deep South, spend extended time in Hawaii, and visit National Parks. So I planned WWOOFing stays that allowed me to do all these things. For me traveling between farms has been as important as the time spent on the farms. I've visited most regions of the US and have gained a deeper sense of my country's history and different cultures.